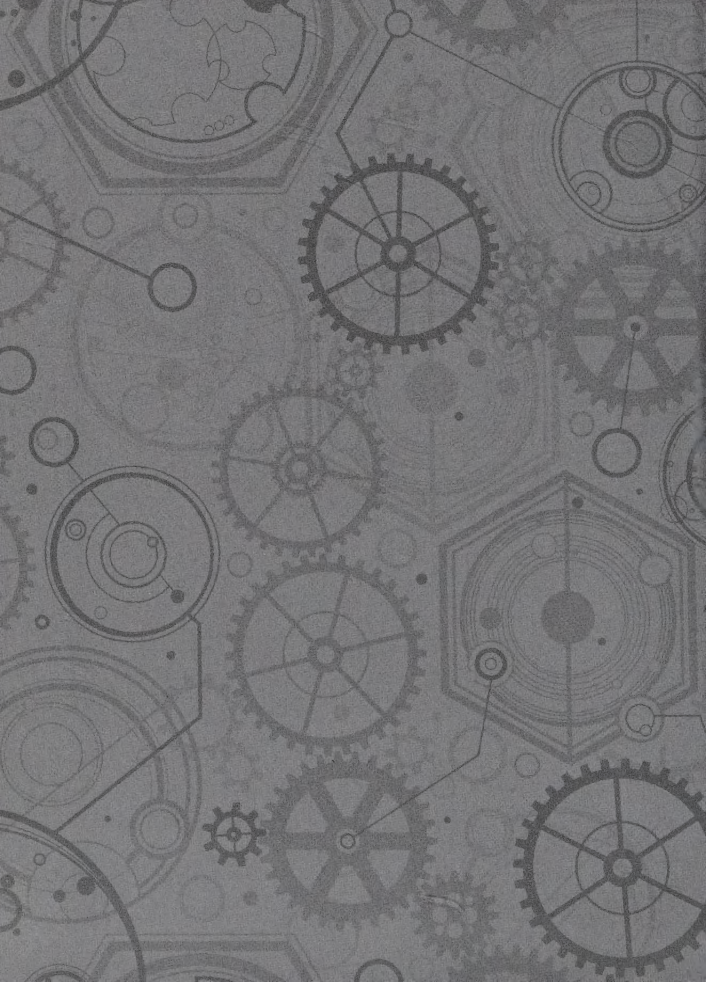


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ANDIBA
AND THE
FOUR SLITHEEN



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ANDIBA AND THE FOUR SLITHEEN



Written by Justin Richards
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PUFFIN



nce, in a small town nestled in a remote valley far from any other towns or cities, there lived a young woman called Andiba. Her home town was unremarkable, except for its winery and distillery, which was known for producing the very best wine and vinegar anywhere in the region.

Andiba liked living in this little town. Several days a week she worked in a small bakery, selling bread and cakes to the local townspeople. The best part of her

day was when Vash came in to buy bread. Vash, whose father was the manager of the winery and distillery, always seemed to be happy. His smile brightened Andiba's day.

When she was not working in the baker's shop, Andiba would go walking in the valley just beyond the town. She liked the fact that she was able to walk out into the countryside and, in just a few minutes, lose herself in the fields and woodland. She loved to walk alone, listening to the wind in the trees, the birds singing and the distant chuckle of the streams and waterfalls.

One day while she was out walking Andiba heard voices, which was unusual. Even though other people from the town did venture into the countryside, the valley was so large that Andiba rarely met anyone

else – especially since she did not keep to the paths and roads, but explored the more remote areas. The voices were deep and strange, and this made Andiba wary. Being careful not to make any noise and to stay hidden in the trees, she crept closer to try to find out who the voices belonged to.

She found herself at the edge of a slope that led down into a shallow dip in the landscape. Below her was a large silver building. It was strange, sleek and curved, like nothing she had ever seen before. Standing outside it were four creatures – also like nothing she had ever seen before. They were tall with pot bellies and long arms that ended in clawed fingers. Their heads, which seemed to be balanced precariously on their necks, had round,

almost childlike faces with big, dark eyes.

‘The ship will be safe here,’ one of the creatures told the others. ‘No one from the town ventures this far afield.’

‘Even if someone did find it,’ another of the creatures said, ‘they are such a primitive people that they would think it was just a building. The concept of space travel is far beyond them. And they cannot get in without the verbal entry code.’

This was certainly all beyond Andiba; she had absolutely no idea what the creatures were talking about. What was clear to her, though, was that they had come from far, far away, and she suspected that their intentions, whatever they might be, were not good. As the creatures’ conversation continued, Andiba became sure of it.

‘The orbital survey confirms that the best location to mine the madranite and other rare minerals is where the town is situated,’ one of the creatures said.

‘That is regrettable,’ the first replied. ‘But we Slitheen have never shied away from doing what we must to secure a profit. We shall have to destroy the town and everyone in it.’

Andiba put her hand over her mouth to stop herself gasping aloud. She had to find out exactly how these Slitheen planned to destroy her home town. She could not simply stand by and let that happen – but it was not going to be as easy as simply staying hidden and listening to their plans.

‘We should continue this discussion inside the ship,’ one of the Slitheen said.

‘The main computer will have downloaded all available data on the town so we can start to plan our attack.’

The others nodded, and they all turned towards a door in the side of the metal building.

‘Open, six one three,’ one of them said. The door slid silently open. All four creatures made their way inside, and the door slid shut behind them.

Andiba frowned, wondering what to do. Should she hurry back to the town and raise the alarm? Who, if anyone, would believe her? And what could she usefully tell them? *No*, she decided, *it would be better to know more about the plans these Slitheen are making.*

Her heart thumping hard, Andiba made her way quietly down to the metal

building. There was no obvious way to open the door – no handle or lever – so she repeated the words she had heard the Slitheen say.

‘Open, six one three.’

Immediately the door slid open and, pausing for just a moment, Andiba stepped into the darkness beyond.

It took a little while for her eyes to adjust. When they did, she could see a corridor trailing off into the strange building. Further along the corridor, a pale green light spilled out of a doorway and Andiba could just make out the murmur of the creatures’ voices.

As she crept cautiously towards the green-lit doorway, it became apparent that the voices were coming from yet further

along the corridor. Andiba was curious to see what was through the glowing green doorway, though, so she peered carefully inside on her way past. Her eyes widened in surprise and disbelief.

Beyond the doorway lay a room bathed in the green glow; the light seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. But it was what was inside the room that had startled Andiba. The room was full of crates and, because they did not have lids on them, Andiba could see that they were filled with jewels. There were diamonds, rubies, emeralds and many others she had no names for, all glittering in the pale light.

The voices from down the corridor had grown louder now, and Andiba had to

remind herself why she was here. Tearing her eyes from the bounty in front of her, she stepped out of the room and carried on down the corridor.

Soon she saw light coming from another doorway further along. The Slitheen's voices grew steadily clearer and, as soon as Andiba could discern what they were saying, she stopped. She saw no point in going any closer to them than she had to.

'This distillery concerns me,' one of the Slitheen was saying. 'It produces wine, and also vinegar.'

There were muffled noises that sounded to Andiba like agreement.

'We must destroy the distillery before we can attack the town,' another of the creatures said.

‘Obviously,’ added a third. ‘We cannot allow the inhabitants to have access to a weapon they could use against us – whether they know it’s a weapon or not.’

A weapon? Andiba thought. *What could they mean?* Her curiosity outweighed her fear, and she crept a little closer.

‘Then we must infiltrate this distillery,’ said the Slitheen who seemed to be in charge.

‘We only have one bodysuit,’ another pointed out.

‘One will be enough.’

Andiba had reached the doorway now, and she risked a quick look round its edge. She stared into the room for the briefest moment before stepping back out of sight, but she had seen enough. One of the

Slitheen was holding up what looked like an empty human skin; the pale, dead features of the limp face were even more frightening than the Slitheen themselves.

Andiba backed away down the corridor. She had heard and seen enough, she decided. Now she had to get to the distillery and warn Vash's father that the Slitheen were coming. She hadn't been able to work out why but, for some reason, they were frightened of the distillery. And she had the distinct impression that it was not the wine but the vinegar that scared them.

The door to the ship had closed behind her. Andiba felt a moment of panic. *What if the words that opened the door only worked from outside?* But, to her relief, the door opened at once when she said them again.

Soon she was running up the incline and through the woodland back towards the town.

She was exhausted by the time she reached the distillery. The manager listened to her breathless story of strange creatures planning to destroy the town. As she spoke, Andiba's frustration grew; it became increasingly obvious that the manager did not believe a word of what she was telling him.

When she finished, the man smiled and told her it was an interesting story – she evidently had a very active imagination. Despite her protests, he showed her out of his office and pointed her towards the main doors of the distillery.

Furious and frustrated, Andiba made

her way out of the distillery. She walked past the great metal chambers where the wine and vinegar bubbled away, fermenting. With every step, she became more determined to do something – the only problem was that she had no idea what she could do.

She was paying little attention to where she was going, and, on her way out the doors, Andiba collided with someone coming into the distillery. She stepped back, apologising. It was only when the person spoke that she realised who she had bumped into. It was Vash.

‘Andiba?’ he said in surprise. ‘What are you doing here?’

Andiba was so relieved to see someone she knew that she almost burst into tears.

Vash could see she was upset, so he led her to a bench outside and they sat down.

Andiba told him everything that had happened. To her surprise, Vash did not laugh or tell her she was imagining it. His frown deepened as she went on.

‘Do you believe me?’ she demanded when she had finished.

He shrugged. ‘Why would you lie? It doesn’t sound like the sort of thing anyone would make up.’

Before either of them could say another word, a cart drew up close by. One of the distillery workmen hurried to help the rather portly driver down. In the back of the cart were four huge wooden barrels, just like the ones the distillery used to ship the wine and vinegar.

But it was the driver who held all of Andiba's attention. She had seen his wide, smiling face before – but limp and dead.

'That's him,' she hissed to Vash. 'The driver – it's one of the Slitheen.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course,' she told him, shuddering. 'It's not a face I shall ever forget.'

The driver had gone inside the distillery. Vash hurried over to speak to the man who had helped the driver down from the cart. When he came back, he told Andiba, 'The man has gone to see my father. Apparently he has important business about some new distilling process he has developed and thinks will interest my father.'

'He's lying!' Andiba insisted.

Vash agreed. 'I think you're right, but Father won't listen to you. He probably won't listen to me either . . . but wait here while I go to the office and find out what's going on. Then we can decide what best to do.'

Andiba nodded. 'All right.'

She waited nervously for Vash, and every moment seemed to last forever.

After what felt like an eternity, the driver of the cart returned. He stood by and supervised several workmen while they unloaded the four enormous barrels and carried them inside the distillery. Andiba saw the workmen place the barrels in a corner of the main distilling area. Then the cart driver spoke to the manager again. Andiba could see Vash standing nearby, listening.

Andiba watched as the cart driver prised open one of the big barrels, then gestured to its contents while speaking to the manager and Vash. He then replaced the lid, and the three of them headed off into the main part of the distillery.

Andiba was beginning to wonder if the men would ever return when the cart driver reappeared. He walked briskly out of the main doors, barely glancing at Andiba before he clambered back up on to the cart and drove away.

Vash followed a few moments later. He sat down beside Andiba.

‘I think you’re right about the vinegar,’ he said. ‘Father gave that man a tour of the distillery, but he kept well back from the vinegar and wouldn’t even pick up a

bottle. It was as if he was afraid he would be burned by it.'

'What was in the barrels he delivered?' Andiba asked.

'He said it was wine. He promised us it is the very best wine we will ever taste, and he said he'd come back tomorrow to explain the process he used to make it. It's funny,' Vash went on, 'but he insisted we shouldn't taste the wine until he comes back.'

'Then I think we should certainly taste it now,' Andiba said.

Vash nodded. 'I agree. Let me talk to my father. Even he thought there was something odd about that man – I could tell.'

Vash's father was busy, but it was nearly the end of the working day. He agreed that after the workers had gone home and the

distillery was shut down for the night he would examine the wine in the barrels the man had brought.

It was dark outside by the time Vash's father was ready. Most of the lights in the distillery were off, and the whole place had an eerie feel to it. Just as the cart driver had done earlier, Vash's father prised the lid off one of the barrels. He picked up a long ladle used for tasting the wine and dipped it into the liquid. Andiba and Vash watched as he raised the ladle to his lips and took a sip. His expression did not change as he slowly lowered the ladle and tipped the remaining liquid on to the floor. It was colourless.

'Is it the best wine you've ever tasted?' Vash asked.

'It's water,' his father replied, then

he turned to Andiba. 'You think this is somehow connected to the creatures you say you saw?'

Andiba nodded, relieved that he seemed at last to believe her story. 'They talked about infiltrating the distillery,' she said. 'And I think I know how they plan to do it.' She led Vash and his father away from the barrels. 'They said they only had one body suit, one human disguise, but I saw four of these Slitheen.'

'And there are four barrels,' Vash's father said thoughtfully.

'One is full of water,' Vash added. 'But what about the other three?'

'Perhaps we should find out?' his father suggested. 'But first we should make sure that we are armed, that we have some sort



of weapon with which to protect ourselves if need be. Perhaps we should send for the constable.'

'No,' Andiba said. 'There's no time. Now that the distillery is closed for the night, the Slitheen – if they are indeed hidden in those barrels – could come out at any time. They plan to destroy the entire distillery.'

'It's fortunate then that we might have just the weapon we need right here,' said Vash.

'This is a distillery, not an arsenal,' his father pointed out. 'What weapon could we possibly have here?'

Vash smiled. 'Vinegar!'

It took some effort to persuade Vash's father that vinegar could be the weapon they needed; Vash and Andiba were not

entirely convinced themselves. But, based on what they had overheard and seen, it made sense. Why else would the Slitheen be so worried about the vinegar if not because it was a threat to them? First Andiba had overheard the four Slitheen talking about destroying the distillery, then the visiting cart driver had been afraid to go anywhere near the vinegar. Andiba, Vash and his father might not understand exactly what about the vinegar terrified the Slitheen, but it was increasingly clear that it might be their only – and best – defence against the creatures.

Not far from where the Slitheens' barrels had been placed stood a huge vat of vinegar, waiting to be bottled. Vash and his father attached a hose to the outlet tap at

the base of the vat, then Vash and Andiba held the heavy hose and aimed it at the nearest of the Slitheens' barrels. Vash had his hand on the valve at the end of the hose. When he and Andiba were ready, Vash nodded to his father.

They watched anxiously as Vash's father pried the lid off a second barrel. Inside, the barrel was a mass of shadows; it was instantly obvious that there was no liquid in it. As the three of them looked on, the shadows began to move, as if they were uncoiling.

Suddenly a long, muscular arm lashed out, just missing Vash's father. He took a step backwards as the creature inside the barrel unfolded itself completely and stood up.

Vash opened the valve on the hose. Vinegar gushed out over the Slitheen.

For a moment, the Slitheen held its round, dark eyes on Vash and Andiba. For a moment, Andiba thought they had made a terrible mistake. But then the creature gave a roar of pain and anger, and exploded. Sticky, gooey fragments splattered across the floor.

At once the other two barrels began to shudder. Just as one shattered, sending wooden splinters flying across the room, Vash and Andiba turned the hose. The Slitheen that had been inside the now busted barrel hurled itself at the two of them – but the spray of vinegar from the hose caught it full on. Moments later, it too exploded into a glutinous mess.

The third Slitheen was just seconds behind. Having realised the fate of its fellows, it did not attack, but instead turned and ran for the main doors. Vash adjusted the valve on the hose, increasing the pressure of the liquid coming through. The spray lengthened, following the Slitheen until it eventually caught up and hosed down the creature's back. The Slitheen threw up its hands, and in an instant was gone in a squelching splat.

‘Well,’ said Vash’s father, ‘it looks like there’ll be some tidying up to do in the morning.’

‘What will the last Slitheen do when it finds out what has happened?’ Andiba wondered.

‘It will have to come back tomorrow to

see if their plan worked,' Vash said.

'And,' his father told them, 'we shall be ready and waiting.'

The next day, when the cart pulled up and the large man climbed down, Vash's father hurried out to greet him. Vash and Andiba followed. If the Slitheen disguised as a man was surprised to see no sign of trouble at the distillery, he hid it well.

'We are so anxious to try your wine,' Vash's father said. 'Although we shall have to clear the barrels first,' he went on. 'We had some new equipment delivered after you had gone yesterday. We don't have much spare room, so we had to store it on top of your barrels. It's very heavy.'

The man nodded and smiled as

though this made perfect sense. 'So long as we can move it to open my barrels,' he said. 'I think I can safely say that you are in for a surprise.'

'One of us is,' Andiba murmured to herself.

'Of course,' Vash's father said to the man. 'We'll open the barrels in a moment.'

'But first we brought some of our own wine for you to try,' Vash said.

Andiba handed the man a wine bottle and a glass. 'See how you like this vintage,' she said.

The man seemed reluctant to drink, but they insisted, telling him they would open his barrels as soon as he had sampled the produce of the local vineyards.

So the man poured a small measure

into his glass. 'It's an unusual colour,' he remarked as he inspected the wine through the glass.

'It's an unusual wine,' Vash said. 'It's traditional to drink it down in one gulp, and without smelling it. The joy in this wine comes from the taste alone, but it has a notoriously bad bouquet.'

The man did as Vash suggested.

At once his expression changed. His hand went to his throat. 'That's not wine,' he gasped.

'No,' said Andiba. 'It's vinegar.'

Moving quickly, she, Vash and Vash's father stepped away so that they were well back when the vinegar took its lethal effect.

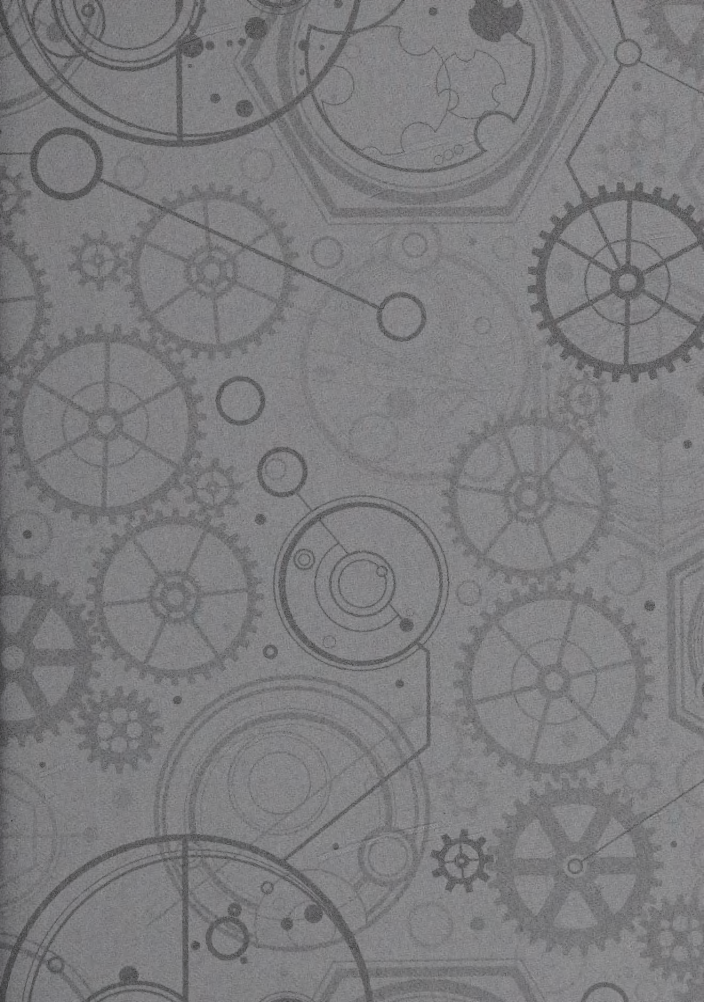
'More mess to clear up,' Vash's father sighed.

Although she had enjoyed working in the bread shop, Andiba far preferred the job that Vash's father gave her, coordinating the business strategy at the distillery. She saw Vash every day, and every day they grew closer until one day they realised they had fallen in love.

Andiba knew that she and Vash would never lack for anything. She had not forgotten the strange metal building that was hidden just outside the town; she alone knew the secret words that would open the door. Inside, there were jewels and riches beyond imagination. Even after they had shared Andiba's precious discovery with the rest of the townsfolk, Andiba and Vash would be able to live more than comfortably for the rest of their days.

Vash's father could not have been more pleased, for his son was to marry a young woman whose bravery and intelligence were beyond measure. At Andiba and Vash's wedding, he served only the very finest of all his wines.





Out walking in the hills one day,
a young woman called Andiba
hides when she sees several strange
creatures beside an odd metal craft.
Can she stop their dastardly plans for
the local distillery before it's too late?

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